



MEET THE CHAMPIONS



The Dragon's Errand

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Or, how Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker, got his name.

"You've caused me a great deal of trouble, creature." Meloku paced in a circle around the airy chamber, his feet tracing the swirls of smoky jade that spiderwebbed across the marble floor. He rubbed his temples with long, delicate fingers. As ambassador of the soratami, he had presided at many inquisitions--one needed information to make informed decisions, after all--but few of them were quite so...irritating. He expected little more of these land-dwellers than theft and other petty crime, but here, in his very chambers! The insolence was more than a personal affront; it was a thumbing of the nose at all the people of the sky, a biting of the fingers at the pale glory of the moon, an insult, an outrage--



Meloku sighed and looked up at his prisoner where he hung in the middle of the chamber from the bottom of a long, inverted spire that protruded like a stalactite of white marble from the vaulted ceiling. A silvery cord ran between spire and prisoner--the only thing holding him up. Ten feet below was a perfectly circular hole in the middle of the floor. Below that were nothing but wispy clouds and a 2,000-foot drop through empty space to the waves of the ocean far, far below. He waved his arms a bit and immediately began to spin in a slow circle. Though standing next to Meloku he would only come up to the soratami's waist, the akki was large for his race, and that cord looked far too slender to hold him for long. He immediately regretted having eaten all those ripe *biwa* off the tree in the courtyard on his way in. They had looked so good, so golden-sweet. Why, he could hear them calling to him... A bead of sweat formed between the ridged plates of his forehead and trickled down between his eyes to the tip of his pointed nose where it hung pendulously for what seemed like an eternity before dropping down, down through the hole in the floor where it was whipped away into nothingness by the high winds that brushed the underbelly of the floating cloud palace. The akki swallowed.

Meloku stopped his circling and raised an eyebrow. "You know, there are other ways of persuading you to talk." He removed a slender dagger from his waistband and eyed the cord above the akki's head. "Still, I thought I'd give you one last chance to be civilized, *Kiki-Jiki*." The akki tensed. "Yes, I know who you are," said Meloku, smiling, "my mirrors show many, many things...though I admit it caused me much physical pain to have to watch your grimy brethren rolling about and bashing each other's heads in with rocks, even from a distance." Meloku shook his head and began to pace again.

"You are Kiki-Jiki, a young akki buck as I suppose you fashion yourself. You were born the fourth child in your family, kicked out when you used your sister in lieu of a rock for throwing practice in the lava fields, and taught your older but marginally stupider brothers how to play "taunt the *oni*." You survived these escapades and the wrath of your extended family by virtue of being a good runner...but nowhere in my mirrors do I see anything showing *where* in Kamigawa you've hidden that pearl of mine, much less anything explaining how you managed to sneak into a cloud palace with no visible means of transportation!" Meloku took a deep breath and looked up, thin lips curving into a cold smile. "Now tell me, for I greatly wish to know, how it is that an akki can fly?"

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What a day. Kiki-Jiki picked a russet-brown goober out of his left nostril and flicked it into a scrubby jasmine bush that had grown up out of a crack in the rocks of the cliff face. He scowled as the bush uprooted itself, shook its leaves at him in a vegetative fury, and scampered off. Something was wrong here, and he knew exactly what it was; he just couldn't remember the word for it. It was that thing where strange stuff happens for no good reason, and there's always a wizard or some nasty *kami* involved. *Muh-something.* Kiki-Jiki scratched his head and glared at the hot, sandy path beneath his feet. *Just my luck--another dead-end.* He had spent the better part of the morning scabbling around on these rocks looking for that blasted grotto he saw from the far ridge the day before. He had seen the arch of the cave, the glimmer of evening sun on the pool within. Ach, it was maddening! He could practically smell the fish and

blind albino cave-frogs...by the Patron's bulbous bile-sacs he could even hear the trickling of water. But where? Everywhere he looked was dry, sun-blasted rock.

Food.

The last thing he had eaten was the month-old hunk of wormbread that Paku-Paku had thrown at him when he fled the caves. It was a good shot. Would have brained him if he hadn't blocked it with that mudfowl he'd stolen. He had been hoping to get some eggs out of the scrawny thing but after the bread incident it went limp as a cave slug and that night when he took cover in an old lightning-blasted treehusk he had plucked it to find it was mostly bones anyhow. So, he ate the old wormbread, and lost one of his good teeth in the process. Now he was famished. Kiki-Jiki picked his way through the rocks down toward where he thought he could hear the river, his belly rumbling and his head filled with thoughts of...no, actually it was pretty empty too. Stomach was calling the shots now.

He had come to a flattish sort of place. He scanned the ground, his eyes darting back and forth, looking for bugs, lizards, bones, anything...and lighted upon a patch of green in the shade of some rocks a few paces away. He scampered over and prodded the weeds to make sure they weren't hostile then reached down--and he heard water! Quickly, he pressed one pointed ear to the ground. Yes! It was under here, under the rocks! Oh, how clever--it was an *underground* river! He immediately began digging at the ground with his claws. His hands were made for scooping, and the earth around the rocks was dry and crumbly. In no time he had a respectable hole, almost big enough for him to crawl into. Soon he would be feasting on fish and snails and slugs! Kiki-Jiki stood up from his work and gave a victory yelp, shaking his grimy fists in defiance at the sky...when the ground beneath him collapsed and he tumbled through space and plunged head-first into dark, rushing water.

Little scaly fish-with-legs, searching with eager claws in water hungry for light. Turn back, little fish. You are not the only one who hungers.



Kiki-Jiki opened his eyes and took stock of his situation. He was in a very dark, mostly dry place--ah, a cave--which was good, and there was a large fish caught wriggling under the rim of his shell. This could be brained on a rock and eaten, which was also good. However, he had a sinking suspicion that the only way out of this place was the way he had come, and that was bad. He could feel the chill spray coming off the horribly cold subterranean river rushing through a crack in the wall not an arms length away from him only to disappear through some fissure further off down the cave. Yes, the river brought him here, or so he had to assume from his general wetness and the fish; for he found he couldn't remember anything very clearly about the last five minutes. He had been digging--he

remembered that. And then there was some falling bits, and some thrashing around bits, and then a lot of cold and dark and wet bits, and then...a voice.

He sneezed and shuddered. Someone, or something had been talking to him! He looked around the cavern. His large eyes had adjusted enough to see a little ambient light coming from some moss on the ceiling, but as far as he could tell there was no one else lurking in the shadows. He looked down at the lidless eyes of the catch in his hand. A fish--the voice had called him a fish. Well, whoever it was, it was pretty stupid mistaking an akki for a fish. Most akki couldn't swim to save their lives. Kapi-Chapi had done pretty well in that lavaflow, sure, but it wasn't like she had actually made it, and besides, her form was atrocious. Kiki-Jiki chuckled at the memory, and bit the head off his fish. No way was he going back in that water, but if he was going to die here, at least he wouldn't die hungry!

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Kiki-Jiki's stomach growled. He had been pacing back and forth for hours and completely surveyed his prison five times over. His only discovery was that he had been wrong about possible exits. On the side of the cave farthest from the black-flowing river, where the shadows were deepest, there was place where the floor abruptly gave way to a chasm that stretched about four times his own height to the far wall of the cave. This is where he now sat. Dangling his legs over the edge, he had quickly tired of the "I am a pebble, hear me scream as I plummet to my death" game that had so entertained him as a child, and well into puberty, and really even now. But no matter, he had run out of pebbles. About the only thing he had left to throw was the tough, spiny tail of the fish he had caught in his shell, and this he had been saving as a last treat before the darkness took him. So much for waiting, he thought as he held up the tail and opened his mouth--when a gust of wind blew unexpectedly out of the chasm, and ripped the tail right out of his hand.

Kiki-Jiki shrieked in dismay as the tail fluttered up in the blast of wind, then turned and began to fall down into the chasm. His instinct was to lunge after the thing, for as boney and spiny as it might be it was all he had--but he held himself back. No one in his right mind would jump into a yawning chasm just to grab a measly fishtail! Then a powerful force gripped him with all the strength and fury of an old relative trying to throttle him for some imagined slight--it was stomach, and stomach was to be obeyed. Kiki-Jiki grinned and launched himself into space. He would eat that tail if it was the last thing he did. And it occurred to him as he plummeted downward into darkness that it probably would be.

Clever fish, to find my lair so readily. Foolish fish, for now you must die.

Kiki-Jiki bolted upright. Something was really wrong, and he had a pretty big suspicion it was more of that *muh*-stuff at work. First of all, he hadn't expected to land so soon after jumping, especially since as far as he could tell he was landing on *thin air*--air that felt as hard as the tribe elder's shell, and hurt just about as

much as being sat upon by said elder (a punishment he had endured many times for his various escapades). Weirder still, he had actually seen himself *keep falling* into the chasm below. Damn shame, he was just about to catch that fishtail too, when he saw himself fell out of sight.

*Open your eyes, little fish. See the one who will end you.
See me.*

Kiki-Jiki gasped. He wasn't standing on nothingness any more. He was standing in the very middle of another cave, somewhat larger than the first one and more or less circular. He couldn't see a ceiling here at all, and there was something strange about the walls. They looked like they were made out of glinting, bluish panels, each as large as he was and fit snugly up against the next. There must have been fifty of them. And by each panel...wait. He wasn't alone. There, in front of each panel, stood horrible, stunted creatures. He whirled around and yes, they were standing along the wall behind him, too! They stared at him with bloodshot eyes peering from both sides of horrid, pointy noses. Oh, they were ugly! Kiki-Jiki fell to his knees and lifted his hands to show he was unarmed, and as one, the foul things fell to the ground and lifted their hands in a mockery of his surrender! They would eat him for sure, they were evil, they were vile, they were...akki? Kiki-Jiki scratched his head. The fifty akki scratched theirs. He stood on one leg and hopped in a circle; the fifty imitated his every move. Mirrors! He was in a room filled with mirrors!



He had heard that there were people in Kamigawa that had devised a way to freeze the surface of the water and put it on a wall, and they called the result a "mirror," but this was the first time he'd ever seen the real thing. He made to run over and inspect one close up, but then he caught a glint of something on the ground. The fishtail! Oh, his luck was taking a definite turn for the better. He quickly scooped up the tail and opened his mouth--

Can you see me, little fish?

Kiki-Jiki dropped the tail and bit his tongue. The voice, how could he have forgotten the voice? All around the room the mirror-panels had begun sliding, and now a gap was opening in the wall. And there, from the darkness behind the wall, came a giant, blue, reptilian head. Kiki-Jiki's legs shook and gave way underneath him. The bottom of his shell smacked into the hard ground. Tears filled his eyes as he saw the head draw closer, and the panels shifting and bending, falling into place in a row behind it. By the Patron's lava-singed tail! Those weren't mirrors, they were...they were...scales.

Here I am.

A *ryu*; a great dragon. Its voice echoed inside Kiki-Jiki's skull. Oh, and it was big, huge, enormous. It was probably old, too, and if Kiki-Jiki knew anything about elders, they were cantankerous.

I am older than time itself, frightened fish. The lives of your kind are like a brief shifting in the current to me. I have seen the rings grow on the great oysters in the deep and seen their shells decay to sand. My scales are brighter than any diamond in the earth, and my wrath burns hotter than any fire from the mountains. And I am angry, fish-with-legs, very angry, for something dear to me has been stolen.

Kiki-Jiki's life flashed before his eyes. His brothers and sisters in the home cave, hitting him with rocks. His father shooing them away; then grinning and hitting him with a bigger rock. His mother waving him to her side; then smacking him in the head with a particularly large and pointy rock. Frantically, he searched for a good memory, something with food in it at least. But it was over too quickly. It was done. This was the end. He cowered before the *ryu* and tearfully crammed the fishtail into his mouth. The bones caught in his mouth and he began to whimper and hack, quietly. He could feel the great lizard's breath wash over him like a tidal wave. It smelled like dead fish. Kiki-Jiki's eyes rolled up and he slammed into the ground, out cold.

Blackness...

Little fish-with-shell...little fish...

That voice! If only it would leave him alone. Let him die with some dignity. Okay, that might be asking for too much, but at least he could have a little privacy before the end.

You were clever to find my lair, very clever. Perhaps I have a use for you...

* * *

The sun was shining. White clouds flitted by. And birds...there were birds wheeling against the blue sky. Kiki-Jiki was on a boat, swaying in an ocean. So calm, so peaceful. No cave, no mirror-scales, no voice in his head. He smiled. He felt the boat rise on the swell of a wave and a puffy white cloud floated close. So soft, so nice. "Hello cloud..." The cloud shot down and passed beneath him. By the Ancient Hardshell! He wasn't on any boat! He was flying! He looked down and saw his face looking back up from a mirror-bright blue scale. He was riding on the *ryu*'s back! He remembered now--the voice saying it needed him to retrieve something that was stolen, a pearl of great value, kept in a floating palace in the sky...

Then Kiki-Jiki looked up and saw it, looming in the distance: an incredible palace that seemed to grow up out of the clouds. Its spires were dazzling in the sun. He could see great arches and courtyards, and here and there vehicles that looked like chariots were skating on the wind currents, back and forth between the main palace and outlying clouds with smaller towers and pagodas on them. These were the halls of the soratami, the people of the moon, a tall, cold race that floated on the air and cared little for the people on the ground, and least of all for the akki. He had heard stories about Zo-Zu the Punisher leading the bravest of the akki on stone-throwing practice near where the soratami chariots were known to fly. And in the charred remains he had seen the results of their powerful *muh...muh...*

Magic.

"Magic!" the Kiki-Jiki shouted over the rushing wind. That was the word! He chortled in delight and almost slid off the *ryu's* back, but the great beast snaked in the air, balancing his rider. "But wait--if the soratami have magic, won't they see us coming?"

They will see a swift-moving cloud, nothing more, little fish. The soratami are wise and wary, but they do not own the skies. There are many here much older than they.

The *ryu* swerved left around a dark cumulonimbus.

That cloud there, that is a rajjin, a thunder kami. Woe to the soratami chariot that passes beneath its stormy veil.

"Okay," Kiki-jiki said, gulping. "But what about once you let me off at the palace, what then?" But the ancient *ryu* merely smiled. His scales gleamed with the reflected light of shining minarets and slender, curved buttresses. They had arrived.

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Kiki-Jiki wolfed down his fifth *biwa* from the heavily laden fruit tree in the courtyard outside and contemplated his next move. What was it with these soratami and their wide-open halls? He had half expected the inside of the palace to have some measure of comfort, a little rough-hewn rock, some cave moss, maybe. But all this glass and marble was downright unsettling, and the vast chambers were not good for sneaking. He ducked down a passageway, feet going pitter-pat across painted clouds on the cold flagstone floor. He must be close to the ambassador's chambers the *ryu* was talking about. Then, voices from around the corner, coming this way. Kiki-Jiki took refuge behind a large jade carving of what looked like a giant mouth with wings.

"...so the doguso land-dweller says to me 'the *kami* they take everything from us, everything! When they take the very land away from us, what will we stand upon!' and I say to him 'A worrisome problem, I'm sure.'"

Kiki-Jiki heard a voice talking, followed by cold laughter as two soratami came floating out of a nearby doorway and past his hiding place. They were tall and slender, and wore long indigo robes inscribed with strange looping symbols and glittering threads of gold. One of them had wide red cuffs on his robe and it seemed that the patterns on his kimono robes twirled and shifted as he moved by. *That must be the ambassador.* Kiki-Jiki waited for them to disappear into one of the halls behind him before he slipped around the strange statue and through the doorway.

He had entered a room far more richly decorated than any he had seen since arriving at the palace. Pillars of glowing green jade stood around the chamber, contrasting pleasantly with the swirling whites and grays of the marble walls. In alcoves on either side of the room stood elegant candelabra carved out of white bone. They were empty but cast flickering light from flames that floated a few inches above where each candle should have been. On the far wall, in the center of a thick tapestry with golden brocade lining a giant woven moon seemed to float above the fabric, casting its own pale light on the back half of the room. It seemed to Kiki-Jiki that the shadow on the moon moved even as he stood there watching it. More magic. His eyes traveled downwards over the silk, further down below the silvery tassels that formed the horizon over which the moon rose, and there, limned in the wan tapestry-moonlight was a great pearl on a pedestal of iron. The *ryu's* pearl.

Kiki-Jiki's palms clenched, and he hesitated a moment. What if this was a trap? What if the soratami had cast some horrible spell of transformation on this pearl and when he grabbed it he'd be turned into something...something worse than an akki! *What if this whole quest is a trick put on by my family to teach me a lesson?* No, most of his relatives wouldn't be able to control their bowels if they saw a real *ryu*, let alone talk one into helping with some elaborate practical joke. Kiki-Jiki grinned, imagining his uncles and aunts fleeing pell-mell from his new friend. He took a last bite of *biwa* and threw the core over onto a nice silk couch. It rolled to the floor, leaving a vaguely orangish trail of slime on the upholstery. Brushing off his hands, Kiki-Jiki strode over to the pedestal and grabbing up the pearl, which he now found to be nearly as big as his head and far, far heavier, he turned to leave. Then he froze.

He was being watched. Out of the corner of his eye he could see someone standing in the nearest alcove, behind the candelabrum. Kiki-Jiki felt the weight of the pearl in his hands. The *ryu* didn't specify that the pearl had to be in any particular condition, and if Kiki-Jiki knew one thing, it was how to throw large objects at people. In one smooth motion, he whirled and raised the pearl in both hands above his head--and the figure in the alcove did exactly the same thing. *Another mirror!* He almost laughed out loud. Pearl tucked back under his arm, he sauntered over to the alcove and shoved the candelabrum off to one side. Now this was a proper mirror: a perfectly clear oval of reflective glass held in a frame of gold, decorated with tiny sapphires and rubies. Set in that frame, Kiki-Jiki's reflection looked pretty damn good. His bony nose was bold, his eyes shone bright and blue, his arms were long and...empty?

Kiki-Jiki looked down at the pearl. Yes, there it was, tucked under his right arm, heavy as an unconscious sibling. He looked at the mirror. His reflection had his arm bent in a strange fashion, but there was *no pearl!* He set the pearl down on the floor, and looked back up. His reflection met his gaze. He scratched his chin. His reflection scratched his own. He smiled and his reflection returned the smile, then *it stuck out its tongue and blew a loud raspberry!* For a second, Kiki-Jiki thought he had done it--it certainly wouldn't be the first time his mouth had done something without his permission--but he glanced down and sure enough his tongue was firmly where it should be, tucked behind his teeth. He looked back up. Now his reflection waving its finger at him! *Cheeky reflection! You think you're so smart?* Furious, Kiki-Jiki reached down and scooped up the pearl. Slowly, he lifted the pearl up over his head and grinned at his reflection. His reflection's face clouded and he held his hands up over his face. He seemed to be shouting something, but Kiki-Jiki couldn't hear the words. "Now who's having fun?" said Kiki-Jiki as he slammed the pearl into his reflection's face.

There was a tremendous shattering sound. The pearl bounced off the mirror and smacked Kiki-Jiki back on to his shell in the middle of the room. He spun, desperately trying to keep the pearl from falling onto the marble floor and cracking or worse: making more noise. He looked up to survey the damage and there, standing in front of the alcove, brushing off shards of mirror-glass, was his reflection! "Who are you?" asked Kiki-Jiki.

"I'm Kiki-Jiki!" his reflection replied.

"No, *I'm* Kiki-Jiki!"

From the hallway outside, they heard voices--soratami, coming to see what the commotion was, no doubt. Kiki-Jiki looked hard at his reflection. "Listen," he said in a loud whisper over the tinkling sound the rest of the mirror was making as the last few shards fell onto the floor. "I don't like the looks of you, but if we don't cooperate, we're both going to fry like mudfowl in a lava pit." His reflection nodded. "This way," said Kiki-Jiki, and lugging the pearl under his arm, he made for the door to the chamber, his reflection close behind.

They were in luck. The soratami ambassador hadn't made it back to the entrance. The two Kiki-Jikis took a hard left and spilled out into a wide courtyard. Kiki-Jiki stopped and turned to his reflection. "Look, I have to get back to the *ryu*."

"So do I!" said his reflection.

Kiki-Jiki thought fast, which was a first for him, and something of a miracle, but he would have to pat himself on the shell later. There was work to be done. "Er, look--let's split up. I'll go left to that spire there, and you go right, through that courtyard there. Then we'll meet behind the palace at the *ryu*. Gives us a better chance!"

His reflection frowned suspiciously.

Damn.

Kiki-Jiki tried a different tactic. "Hey, pick up some more of those *biwa* on your way through, okay?"

His reflection grinned. Same face, same stomach, apparently. Kiki-Jiki shuddered as his reflection ran off across the courtyard. Was he so easily duped? That was something he would have to work on. He turned and ran straight back to the little pagoda where the *ryu* had promised to pick him up. The sun was warm on his shell, and somehow, the pearl didn't feel so heavy anymore.

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The *ryu* sped fast through a string of puffy clouds, swerving now and then to avoid flocks of high-flying giant moths that scattered like pieces of paper in the *ryu*'s wake. The pearl, held in his massive jaws, glowed softly in the crimson light of the setting sun. On his back, Kiki-Jiki sat in a rare moment of contemplation. Then he straightened up and shouted out over the howling wind. "What do you think happened to my reflection?"

He is the prisoner of the soratami ambassador now.

"Oh," said Kiki-Jiki frowning. "I feel kinda bad leaving him behind. I mean, family is one thing, but he's...me!"

Worry not, brave little fish. Your kind's reflections are even more ephemeral than you are. He will not be caught for long. Be happy, fish-with-horns, great mirror breaker. You have done well.

Kiki-Jiki wasn't sure what "ephemeral" meant, but it sounded like some kind of magic that would help his reflection escape, and that was good. He breathed a sigh of relief and looked down on the ground far below. There was the ridge he had climbed the day before, and beyond that, the mountains where he had come from...where his family lived. Kiki-Jiki smacked himself on the shell. He should have made more reflections! The thought of dozens of himself running amuck in the caves made his body quiver with delight. He could almost see his father, mouth wide open in horrified astonishment, buried under a swarm of Kiki-Jikis! He shouted over the wind, "Shoulda grabbed more of those mirrors!"

What can a mirror give you other than what you show it? The magic was yours, clever fish.

"Wait," Kiki-Jiki yelled, scratching between the bony plates on his forehead. "You mean I can make more reflections, whenever I want? I don't need those mirrors?" The *ryu* said nothing, but he thought he could feel a strange vibration through the great blue scales. A rumbling, like...laughter! The *ryu* was laughing! In a rush of motion, they looped up around a cloud and shot down through the air towards the hills below.

The *ryu* had promised to take him to an abandoned orchard he knew of, with lots of overburdened fruit trees and fat snails for the taking. There would be a pool of water there, too, thought Kiki-Jiki—a place where he could try out his new-found talents. Kiki-Jiki grinned. Today was turning out to be a pretty good day, after all.

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High in the cloud palace above them, Meloku paused in his pacing. Fixing his prisoner in his steely gaze, he smiled. "I truly hoped it would not come to this, as I am not fond of barbarism, but you leave me no choice. Let us cut you down, and witness this miracle of akki flight firsthand!" Hanging from the silver cord, the akki squealed and struggled, which made him swing slowly back and forth which made him squeal even louder. "This brings me no pleasure, *Kiki-Jiki*, I assure you," said Meloku, a satisfied gleam in his eyes as he drew his dagger and floated up off the floor toward the spire and his helpless prisoner. Then he paused in mid-air. Something was wrong. The akki was no longer squirming. In fact, he was perfectly still, frozen in mid-air. Meloku raised an eyebrow, then gasped as the akki *splintered* into a thousand gleaming shards that fell like a sudden rain, disappearing into the aether before they reached the floor. All that was left was a tangled length of cord, hanging uselessly from the ceiling spire. Meloku rubbed his temples with long, slender fingers. Yes, it had been a most *annoying* interrogation indeed.

* * *

In a hidden grotto by an underground river, the great blue *ryu* coiled in the darkness around the pearl, that glowed faintly as though it had been warmed by the sun's rays on the journey down from the cloud palace.

Sleep, my child, and grow strong. Soon you will hatch and take your rightful place among the falls and the mists and the stars of this world. You will eat the oysters in the deep, and the sweet cloud-dew, and the fish that walk on your land. Just...go easy on the shelled ones.

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